



Cultural Differences and Cultural Constructs: Reflections on Jewish and Chinese Literalism

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Abstract Different cultures are often set up in a mutually exclusive dichotomy to facilitate conceptualization of the self and the Other. Through a discussion of early Christian typological and allegorical interpretations of the Bible and the so-called Chinese rites controversy among Christian missionaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this essay investigates the contrastive principle underlying the construction of such cultural dichotomies as Hellenism and Hebraism, on the one hand, and the East and the West, on the other, and the consequences of such dichotomous constructions in history and reality.

The conceptualization of cultural difference as an opposition between real or imagined entities, systems, or values, something we find so often in cultural studies today, is by no means new: It is neither modern nor post-modern. As Aeschylus's play *The Persians* and Herodotus's *Histories* made very clear, the ancient Greeks had a strong sense of their own civilization defined against that of the Persians. When Dionysius of Halicarnassus wanted to assert the primacy of Greek or Attic style in rhetoric and oratory in the first century B.C.E., he contrasted the Attic with "her antagonist, an upstart that had arrived only yesterday or the day before from some Asiatic death-hole" (Dionysius 1974: 7). Greece and Asia, Occident and

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Orient, the West and the East: These are fundamental categories or conceptual building blocks by means of which people in different times and places have thought about the world and constructed their self-identities.

What Dionysius called Asia refers, of course, to Asia Minor, but the contrastive principle underlying his reference has a general applicability that goes far beyond the specific location of a Mysia, Phrygia, or Caria. As John Steadman remarked in a sobering argument many years ago, such antitheses are abstract categories of formal logic that the exponents of "metahistory" or *Kulturgeschichte* often employ to fulfill the tasks of "rationalizing cultural geography and idealizing cultural history" (Steadman 1969: 15). When those philosophical historians apply the logical principle of opposition to the study of civilizations, they drastically simplify complex cultural phenomena and reduce them to neatly differentiated groups. "To define the Orient, they contrast it with the West. To elucidate European civilization, they emphasize its opposition to Asia. In their hands, the terms become mutually exclusive—what is true of the one cannot be true of the other" (ibid.). The contrastive principle imposes a logically necessary exclusion on both sides of the dichotomy—Europe and Asia, the Occident and the Orient—without taking into consideration internal differences that may inhabit each of the two sides or overlapping similarities that may undermine a clear-cut opposition. Thus, the advocates of the contrastive principle often ignore or deemphasize differences *within* one culture so that they may highlight differences *between* cultures. All concepts, values, and human activities lose distinction on the level of individual subjectivity only to be reassembled into collective categories, general characteristics, even entire cultural systems, which are said to be mutually exclusive. It is only by reducing cultures to such totalizing collective identities that cultural differences are constructed as absolute and rigidly antithetical.[1]

In a highly suggestive passage of his book, Steadman maintains that the Western tradition seems to have a deeply embedded propensity toward thinking in binary opposition and dichotomies. "As the spiritual heir of two of the most self-conscious of cultures—the Hellenic and the Hebraic—Western civilization has, almost from the beginning, retained much of their inherent spiritual exclusiveness. The one thought in terms of the difference between Hellene and barbarian, the other in terms of Jew and Gentile"

1. For a warning against the danger of facile invocation of collective identities and mistaking cultures for isolated, free-floating entities, see Gates 1993. Gates reminds us, with the French anthropologist Jean-Loup Amselle, that cultures "aren't situated one by the other like Leibniz's windowless monads"; rather, "the very definition of a given culture is in fact the result of intercultural relations of forces" (Gates 1993: 8).

(1969: 30). Martin Hengel makes much the same point when he comments on the tension between the Greeks and the Jews in the Hellenistic period and remarks that "the Greek feeling of superiority with its contrast between 'Hellenes' and 'barbarians' was matched on the Jewish side by a sense of election, unique in antiquity, which was expressed in the contrast between 'Israel' and the 'nations of the world'" (1980: 78). I may add that this divisive propensity is the symptom of ethnocentrism that can be found anywhere, not just in the West. The traditional, sinocentric Chinese also thought in terms of the difference between the civilized Chinese (*hua*) and foreign barbarians (*yi*). The distinction may well refer originally to tribal, ethnic, or racial difference as a simple fact and does not necessarily imply a cultural value judgment, but the quick semantic shift of the word *barbarian* from the etymological sense of "foreign" to the culturally charged meaning of "uncivilized" reminds us of how small a step it may take to move from a purely ethnic distinction to an ethnocentric notion of cultural difference.

Steadman is concerned with the dichotomy between the West and the East, and thus he speaks of the Western tradition as the coming together of two highly self-conscious cultures to form a unified civilization that tends to see itself as distinct from the various non-Western cultures. Of course, the two cultures he mentioned—the Hellenic and the Hebraic—have often been set up in a dichotomous relation with one another, a dichotomy within the Western tradition itself, which does not appear so very different from the one between the Occident and the Orient. Indeed, the same set of terms is often employed in the traditional discourse on Hellenism and Hebraism; the latter is often considered "Oriental." The inherent spiritual exclusiveness of the contrastive principle seems to operate everywhere and to feed, as it were, on Western civilization itself. Before the non-West—a construction that depends on and contributes to the construction of the West itself, and vice versa—comes directly within purview, a persistent opposition is already established between the Hebraic and the Hellenic, representing virtually all sorts of opposition that one finds in the later construction of the East-West dichotomy. It is therefore worthwhile to examine how the contrastive principle is played out in two different situations: how the opposition is set up inside the Western tradition between the Hellenic and the Hebraic, and how it is established "outside it," between the West and the East. In both cases we may find surprising similarities in the construction of cultural difference in a binary opposition. Indeed, the will to differentiation, or the desire for difference, bears a far more complicated and ambiguous relationship with tradition and traditional ideology than those who celebrate cultural difference—like proponents of multicultur-

alism—often realize. By placing the two kinds of dichotomy together, we may recognize that they are both cultural myths whose construction may have serious, even undesirable consequences for the interaction of cultures.

Origen and Rabbinic Interpretation

The interaction of the Hellenic and the Hebraic cultures, as many scholars have noted, has a long history that goes as far back as the time before Alexander the Great (see Hengel 1974), and such an interaction was decisive in contributing to the formation of both Judaism (see Lieberman 1963) and Christianity. Indeed, the emergence of the latter cannot be understood apart from either Hellenism or early Judaism (see Carrington 1957, Hooker 1986, Betz 1994). The connection of Christianity with Greek and Jewish cultures, as Averil Cameron has recently argued, is not a matter of influence but their "integral relationship" (Cameron 1991: 38). In their attempt to establish the ideological supremacy of the Christian doctrine, however, theologians of the early Church often ignored such "integral relationships." In setting up a rigid opposition between Christianity and the other forms of ancient culture, especially Judaism, they constructed differences with inherent spiritual exclusiveness, and many believers thought of the nascent Christianity as a new faith that superseded the old belief in Judaism, on the one hand, and rendered all the gods of paganism obsolete, on the other. The moment Christ was born in Bethlehem, as Milton envisioned it in a famous ode,

> The Oracles are dumb,
> No voice or hideous hum
> Runs through the arched roof in words deceiving.
> *Apollo* from his shrine
> Can no more divine,
> With hollow shriek the steep of *Delphos* leaving.
> (Milton 1957 [1629]: 48)

Here the Advent of Christ is represented as also the silencing of all other voices, which makes the articulation of truth possible only by the Logos of the Christian God.

In the early Christian interpretations of the Bible, the opposition between Hebraism and Hellenism manifests itself in a most egregious form, in the often evoked opposition between the letter and the spirit, between a supposedly Jewish bondage to an exaggerated anthropomorphism or purblind literalism and the transcendental voice of the divine Logos heard through Christian allegorical interpretation. Athens and Jerusalem (or,

more precisely for the cultural geography of late antiquity, the Hellenistic Alexandria and the Syrian Antioch) name the prominent sites of that tendentiously constructed opposition. The usual picture presents the Alexandrian school as eminently Hellenic and essentially Platonic in its pursuit of a higher and spiritual meaning of the biblical text over its bodily sense, while it depicts the Antiochene school as largely Hebraic, laying emphasis on the historical and literal sense of the Holy Scripture. The two schools certainly engaged in methodological rivalries, and it is likely, as Robert Grant says of Antioch, "that wherever the influence of the synagogue was felt by the church the interpretation of scripture had a tendency toward literalism" (1984: 63). In late antiquity, there was evidently a thriving Jewish community in Antioch, whose haggadic and other interpretive traditions may have had some impact on Christian interpretations of the Bible. Wayne Meeks and Robert Wilken note that "exegesis depending ultimately on Jewish models becomes a hallmark of the Antioch school" (1978: 21). Nevertheless, Alexandria and Antioch are not diametrically opposed to one another to form a simple dichotomy between Hellenism and Hebraism. Under a closer examination, the historical context of those rivalries reveals a much more complicated situation than the picture of a rigid dichotomy would lead us to believe.

Although Alexandria was indeed the most important center of Hellenistic culture, it was a Jewish writer, the prolific Philo, who first exemplified Alexandrian allegorism in the exegesis of the Pentateuch and exerted a profound influence on Christian patristic hermeneutics. In Philo's reinterpretation, the rabbinic understanding of the Law as God's revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai was combined with the Greek notion of divine inspiration, which gave the biblical text a deeper truth or spiritual meaning that could be recuperated only through allegorical interpretation. The deeper truth, Philo insists, "loves to hide itself" (quoted in Wolfson 1948: 116). Whenever the biblical text makes "the inspired words of God" seem "base or unworthy of their dignity," one must reject the literal sense in order to understand the spiritual truth allegorically (ibid.: 123). Philo's allegoresis is often said to represent a Jewish apologetics that tendentiously presents the Hebrew Bible vis-à-vis a rich and highly developed pagan culture, but this apologetics finally leads to nothing less than the bold claim that all Greek philosophy, law, and wisdom were ultimately derived from ancient Hebrew sources, that Heraclitus might be "snatching" ideas from Moses "like a thief," and that Plato also "borrowed from the Prophets or from Moses" (ibid.: 160). Philo's allegorical reading of Scripture, as David Dawson remarks in a recent study, can be seen as an effort "to make Greek culture Jewish rather than to dissolve Jewish identity into Greek culture"

(1992: 74), an interpretive attempt to "reshape, redefine, or 'rewrite' formerly nonscriptural, cultural meanings" (ibid.: 107). Philo combined the Greek philosophical approach to ancient texts, especially the allegorical reading of Homer, with the legacy of Jewish halakic and haggadic traditions, with which he was apparently familiar. His allegoresis, as Jean Daniélou observes, was not "a case of Hellenistic gnosis dressed up in biblical imagery" but was in its inspiration "truly biblical, for he was a devout and believing Jew" (1960: 202). On the other hand, while reacting against the excess of Alexandrian spiritualism, the Antiochene exegetes also drew on the Greek tradition of classical rhetoric and textual criticism, and they also aimed at a higher sense of Scriptures, what they called *theōria*, "a term used by Plato but now turned into a weapon against Alexandrian allegorism" (Froehlich 1984: 20). Thus, both the Alexandrian and the Antiochene schools attempted to interpret the biblical text for a higher sense, and despite the rivalries that existed between them, "the sharp antithesis is a construct. . . . The difference between Alexandria and Antioch seems to reflect more the methodological emphases and priorities of the schools than soteriological principles" (ibid.).

Given these shared concerns about the higher sense of the Bible, how was the "sharp antithesis" between the Hellenism and the Hebraism of the early Church constructed? For one model, we can turn to the exegetical works of Origen. Representative of the exegetical method of Alexandria, Origen is the most allegorical of all early Christian interpreters of the Bible and the first to formulate patristic hermeneutic theory in a systematic treatise, *On First Principles*. He sees the divine writings as inspired and containing deeper meanings that are deliberately obscured by the historical and literal sense of the biblical text. The Word of God, says Origen, "used actual historical events wherever they could be accommodated to these mystical [meanings], hiding the deeper sense from the multitude" (1984: 62). He argues that Scripture has a threefold meaning, which he compares to the body, soul, and spirit, and in his biblical exegesis, he always aims to bring out the spiritual sense. "For with regard to divine Scripture as a whole," he claims, "all of it has a spiritual sense, but not all of it has a bodily sense. In fact, in many cases the bodily sense proves to be impossible" (ibid.: 67). In all these aspects, Origen is deeply indebted to Philo (see Wolfson 1948: 158–59). Daniélou provides a list of five elements or principles that Origen took from Philo and that, he argues, generally lead to untenable overinterpretations (see Daniélou 1955: 178–91). But Origen's indebtedness to Jewish interpretation does not end with Philo, for he learned Hebrew from his Jewish contacts, possibly from some rabbis, and often mentions some Hebrew source for the reading of a particular phrase

or passage. Daniélou briefly discusses the influence of Jewish rabbis on Origen (see ibid.: 174–78); Nicholas de Lange devotes an entire book to that subject and goes so far as to declare that "much of what Origen says cannot be understood without a knowledge of the Rabbis, and some of the arguments which have been produced by modern scholars crumble to dust when the evidence of the rabbinic writings is adduced" (1976: 7).

His dependence on Hebrew sources or indebtedness to Philo notwithstanding, however, Origen relentlessly excludes the Jews summarily from the possibility of understanding the Bible correctly. In his writings, the subtle difference between the words *Hebrew* (*Hebraioi*) and *Jewish* (*Ioudaioi*), as de Lange notes, reveals a conscious effort to separate the Old Testament from the Jews: "If the connotations of *Hebraioi* are philological, those of *Ioudaioi* are polemical. *Ioudaioi* is used in the context of the confrontation of the Church and the Synagogue: in recalling debates or disputations, in condemning the Jews for rejecting and killing Jesus, in criticising Jewish literalism in the interpretation of the biblical law" (ibid.: 30). That is to say, though the Old Testament is Hebrew, its true meaning, according to Origen, is not accessible to Jewish understanding. Origen's hermeneutics is resolutely Christocentric and firmly based on the interpretive strategies of Christian typology, which appropriates the Hebrew Scripture while making it devoid of historical substance and denying Jews true understanding. He maintains that descriptions of an anthropomorphic God or the records of historical events in the Old Testament "point figuratively to some mysteries by means of a historical narrative which seems to have happened but did not happen in a bodily sense" (1984: 63). This polemical move not only robs the Hebrew Bible of historical reality but also makes it meaningful only as prefiguration of the coming of Christ. "It must be admitted," says Origen, "that the divine quality of the prophetic statements and the spiritual character of the law of Moses came to light only with the coming of Jesus. Before Christ's advent it was hardly possible to present clear evidence that the old writings were inspired" (ibid.: 52–53). In other words, only Christianity can reveal the holiness of the Hebrew Bible; the Jews may have Scripture, but they do not know how to read it because they only read the letter of the biblical text and understand the Holy Scripture literally.

Literalism in the polemical sense is not just reading the canonical text according to its literal or historical sense; it also means—and this is what Origen repeatedly emphasized—the impossibility of spiritual understanding, the blindness that blocks the Jews from getting the spiritual truth hidden behind the literal sense or the historical narrative of the Holy Scripture. The Jews are bound to the letter, says Origen, and their view

is still blocked by the veil that covered the face of Moses and dimmed the light of the spirit. It is only the Christian allegorists who are able to see the spiritual light beyond the letter. "The veil has been removed," he declares, "and the good things whose shadow the letter displayed have gradually been raised to the status of knowledge [cf. 2 Cor. 3:13–16; Heb. 10:1]" (ibid.: 53). The Pauline dichotomy of the letter and the spirit legitimizes Origen's polemical reading, but the tendentiousness of that reading is also clearly discernible in that dichotomy. Origen's emphasis on the spiritual meaning of the Bible at the expense of the literal and historical sense was later criticized as excessive and excessively Platonic, even heretically Gnostic (see Caspary 1979; Chadwick 1967).

But what is Jewish literalism, anyway? To be sure, rabbinic interpretations, and midrash in particular, generally work with specific words and phrases in the biblical text. "What the midrashist addressed himself to was not first and foremost the book as a whole, i.e. not the allegory itself," says James Kugel, "but single verses, isolated in suspended animation" (1983: 146). This is not to say, however, that Jewish interpretation of the Bible is unconcerned with spiritual meanings or that there is absolutely no possibility of allegorism. The very term *midrash*, as Wolfson points out, denotes the "non-literal method of the rabbis" (1956: 24). In discussing the background of Paul's allegorical method in the New Testament, Wolfson argues that the various nonliteral interpretations Paul used are all "of the rabbinic midrashic kind" (ibid.: 43). In one of the oldest works of midrash, the *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Eleazar Hisma maintained that the verse "Then came Amalek" (Exod. 17:8) "is to be taken in an allegorical sense" to indicate the vital importance of the words of the Torah, "because when [the Israelites] separated themselves from the Torah the enemy came upon them" (Lauterbach 1961 [1933]: 135). To "Tomorrow I will stand upon the top of the hill" (Exod. 17:9), Rabbi Joshua gave a literal reading, but Rabbi Eleazar of Modi'im went far beyond the literal, saying: "Let us declare tomorrow a fast day and be ready, relying upon the deeds of the forefathers. For 'the top' (*rosh*) refers to the deeds of the fathers; 'the hill' refers to the deeds of the mothers" (ibid.: 142). If it makes sense at all to speak of Jewish "literalism," it does so only because these midrashic spiritual readings tend to be based on some "literal" feature, that is, relating to the words and letters of the Scripture. Christian allegorism, in contrast, often posits a spiritual meaning of the text that bears only a tangential relation to its literal sense. The literal and the spiritual meanings are thus not as mutually exclusive in rabbinic interpretation as they tend to be in Origen's exaggerated spiritualism, and one may add that Christian allegorism was surely facilitated by the fact that the Christians were using the Greek Bible, not the Hebrew, and that they knew they were working

with a translation, however inspired they might believe it to be, and thus they were less bound to the letter of the biblical text than the midrashist.

If allegory does exist in rabbinic interpretation, the literal sense, on the other hand, is not completely abandoned by Christian exegetes, either. Origen's excessive spiritualism does not, after all, enjoy universal acceptance in the Christian tradition of biblical hermeneutics. Augustine argues that the Bible contains both plain and obscure passages and that "hardly anything may be found in these obscure places which is not found plainly said elsewhere" (1958: 38). Thomas Aquinas also remarks that "nothing necessary to faith is contained under the spiritual sense which is not elsewhere put forward clearly by the Scripture in its literal sense" (1945: 17). Following this line of argument, Martin Luther claims that the words of the Holy Spirit "can have no more than the one simplest meaning which we call the written one, or the literal meaning of the tongue" (1970: 178). For Luther, as for Augustine and Aquinas, Scripture is its own interpreter (*scriptura sui ipsius interpres*), and in that Christian hermeneutic tradition, as Karlfried Froehlich argues, no either/or was intended: "The literal sense did not exclude the spiritual, or vice versa. Rather, the two were related in a dialectical movement from one to the other" (1979: 127). Seen in this perspective, then, Origen's talk of Jewish literalism appears all the more polemical and is clearly intended to distinguish Christian exegesis from the tradition of Jewish interpretation. The constructed myth of Jewish literalism comes not from any particularly Jewish essence of rabbinic interpretation but from the will to differentiation, the desire to make cultural difference absolute across racial and religious boundaries. Underlying this notion of literalism is the work of the contrastive principle, the inherent spiritual exclusiveness of the either/or thinking, according to which Origen simply must argue that if spiritual truth is revealed to the Christians, it cannot be also understood by the Jews in spite of, or, rather, because of the fact that they all read the same biblical text. It is not that the Christians and the Jews read absolutely differently but that Origen was obliged to construct the cultural myth of literalism in order to *make* an absolute difference between Jews and Christians and to accuse Jews of mistaken or wrong interpretations. Thus, to expose the construction of a cultural myth, to recognize the tendentiousness of the polemical talk of "literalism," may remind us of the danger of exclusion and repression and may help set us free from thinking in rigid binary opposition and collective categories.

Sinology in a Historical Perspective

In secularized modern times, in which religion as a system of beliefs or articles of faith is discreetly separated from scholarship as disinterested

pursuit of knowledge, the influence of Christianity on Western views of China and Chinese culture is perhaps seen by many as an embarrassing legacy at best and thus often forgotten and largely unacknowledged in the academic field of sinology. Nevertheless, the Jesuit missionaries were the first Westerners who made a serious effort to study the Chinese language and culture, and many problems and debates in sinological studies today often recall, albeit in a rather different context, some of the earlier debates among Christian missionaries, especially the so-called rites controversy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (see Mungello 1989 [1985]). The crux of the matter in that controversy was the compatibility or incompatibility of Chinese culture with Christianity—that is, whether the Chinese converts should be allowed to continue their ancestor worship; whether they could possibly have any understanding of the spiritual truth and of concepts like God, angels, salvation, and so on; and whether their language is capable of expressing such spiritual truths and concepts. Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), the head of China missions, and his followers among the Jesuit missionaries spread the idea that Chinese culture, especially Confucianism, had reached a perfect state of natural religion and had thus paved the way for receiving the light of revealed religion, namely, Christianity. That idea is often referred to as the Jesuit approach of "accommodation," the ways in which Ricci and the Jesuit fathers immersed themselves in the native language and culture and made concessions to the Confucian tradition in order to win over members of the cultural elite, the literati-officials at the imperial court of late Ming China. The sympathetic view of Chinese culture that Ricci and his fellow missionaries advocated had a notable impact in Europe and provided philosophers like Leibniz and Voltaire with ideas and information for their enthusiastic praise of Confucius and Chinese culture. By the end of the seventeenth century, as Arthur Lovejoy observes, "it had come to be widely accepted that the Chinese—by the light of nature alone—had surpassed Christian Europe both in the art of government and in ethics" (1948: 105). Filtered through Jesuit interpretations, the political and moral philosophies of ancient China set up an ideal example for many European thinkers, and the Chinese sage Confucius, as Adolf Reichwein puts it, "became the patron saint of eighteenth-century Enlightenment" (1925: 77).

In presenting a positive image of Chinese culture as essentially compatible with Christian values, however, the Jesuit missionaries were following their religious agenda and patiently working toward the eventual conversion of China. Instead of directly debating on matters of religion, the Jesuits worked as scholars, astronomers, and mathematicians, and the battle was often fought on the front of scientific and philosophical debates.

As Lionel Jensen argues persuasively, Confucius, the image of a Chinese philosopher who preached the gospel of monotheism among the ancient Chinese like a prophet or a Christian saint *avant la lettre*, was a Jesuit *invention* constructed in the narrow passage between their accommodationist program to convert the Chinese through enculturation and their awareness of the grave concerns of the higher authorities in the Vatican, who would not allow any concession to a pagan culture. "As the Italian Padres imagined him," says Jensen, "this Chinese saint and his teachings on the one God, *shangdi*, had presaged their arrival and it was with this presumption that they undertook a restoration of what they termed his 'true learning' (*zhengxue*)" (1993: 415). In upholding Confucius as the ancient Chinese saint who shared some basic ideas with the Christians, the Jesuits were able to claim him as their own and, more important, "to represent themselves to the natives as the orthodox bearers of the native Chinese tradition, *ru*" (ibid.). As Ricci wrote in a letter to the General of the Jesuits in 1604, he tried to interpret the Confucian classics and traditional commentaries "*in such a way that it is in accordance with the idea of God*, so that we appear not so much to be following Chinese ideas as interpreting Chinese authors in such a way that they follow our ideas" (quoted in Gernet 1985: 27, emphasis in original). In a peculiar way, this subtle appropriation of the Confucian tradition reminds us of the Christian typological reading of the Hebrew Bible, because in both cases, the true meaning of an ancient tradition, either Jewish or Chinese, is said to have been lost among the native inheritors but to be accessible to Christian interpreters through a more adequate understanding that transcends the letter of their ancient books and the literalism of the native exegetical tradition.

Thus, Ricci and the Jesuit fathers presented themselves as the legitimate bearers of the Confucian legacy, as Confucius's true interpreters, who understood the Chinese philosopher's teachings better than the Chinese themselves. Not only did they attack the Buddhists and the Taoists for exerting a devilish influence on the Chinese; they also dismissed much of the native tradition of what sinologists now call Neo-Confucianism as deviating from Confucius's original teachings. Joachim Bouvet (1656–1730), a Jesuit who served as an important contemporary source of Leibniz's knowledge about China, can be taken as an interesting example.[2] Bouvet

2. For detailed discussion of Bouvet and his relationship with Leibniz, see the works of D. E. Mungello (1977, chap. 3; 1989 [1985], chap. 9). Though Bouvet was much later than Ricci and belonged to a group of the so-called Figurists, who applied the Hermetic idea of ancient theology to the interpretation of Chinese classics, there was essential continuity between them in terms of Jesuit accommodationism, which is what I am concerned with here. As Mungello argues, "Ricci's formula of accommodation had been evolving through-

gave a most imaginative interpretation of Chinese classics, especially the *Book of Changes*, in which he saw the sixty-four hexagrams as organized on the same principle as Leibniz's binary system of numerical progression. In his letters to Leibniz from Beijing, he maintains that the hexagrams invented by the Chinese sage Fu Xi contain the same "true ideas of the ancient hieroglyphs and the cabbala of the Hebrews" (1768: 154–55). Fu Xi's system, and ancient Chinese books in general, he argues, exhibit deep affinities with Christian ideas and "open a way both natural and easy to guide the spirit of China not only to the knowledge of the Creator and natural religion, but also to His only son Jesus-Christ, and to those most difficult truths of Christianity" (ibid.: 165). In another letter, Bouvet cites Clement of Alexandria as saying that God gave Jews the law and Gentiles philosophy in order to lead them to Jesus Christ. "The philosophy which God gave to the Chinese for that purpose and which is contained in their canonical books," says Bouvet, "is then not an atheistic philosophy, . . . but a philosophy like the Christian one" (Collani 1989: 111). Just as Christian allegorists see the advent of Christ prefigured in the Old Testament, Bouvet assures Leibniz that "almost the entire system of the true religion is hidden in the classic books of China, and that the principal mysteries of the incarnation of the Word, the life and death of the Savior, and the main offices of his sacred Ministry are contained, in a prophetic manner, in these major monuments of Chinese antiquity." In a word, the Chinese classics contain "nothing but a continuous texture of shadows, figures, or prophecies of the truths of the new Law" (Bouvet 1768: 165). The use of typological language can hardly be more explicit than in these comments, and Bouvet is certainly more of a typologist than Ricci and many other Jesuit missionaries. The consequence of such typological reading is just as unavoidable. The hidden affinities of the Chinese classics with Christianity, Bouvet claims, are all lost in China, where "the various commentaries done in different times, even before Confucius, had only served to render the understanding more obscure" (ibid.: 154). The Chinese sage Fu Xi, "whose physiognomy has nothing Chinese about it," turns out to be not Chinese at all but is identified by Bouvet as one of "our ancient authors," either Zoroaster or Hermes Trismegistus or Enoch (ibid.: 153).[3] In the Jesuit interpretation of the Chinese classics, typologi-

out the seventeenth century and the intellectual leap to Figurism was a rather small one" (1989 [1985]: 17–18).

3. These names are familiar ones in the Hermetic tradition. "By 1650, a list of the Ancient Theologians included: Adam, Ennoch, Abraham, Zoroaster, Moses, Hermes Trismegistus, the Brahmans, Druids, David, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato and the Sybils. By 1700 the list had grown to include Fu Hsi" (Mungello 1989 [1985]: 307).

cal reading is again predicated on a binary opposition. As Jacques Gernet observes, it "became customary in the Jesuit mission to oppose the true Confucianism of Antiquity, which accorded with 'natural religion' or—better still—with the Bible, to the modern ideas, which were considered to be a betrayal of the ancient traditions" (1985: 28). It is thus as authoritative interpreters of the Confucian tradition that the Jesuit fathers installed themselves among the Chinese, competed with the Buddhists and the Taoists for religious influence, and argued for the fundamental compatibility of Confucianism with the teachings of Christianity.

In trying to find a possible convergence of Chinese culture with Christianity, however, the Jesuits were themselves subjected to the danger of being "converted" or infatuated by the very myth they created about a Chinese natural religion, forgetting the expedient nature of their enculturation. Gernet repeatedly emphasizes that the spirit of Christianity is absolute and exclusive, and he blames Ricci and his followers for losing sight of this spiritual exclusiveness and overdoing it in cultural accommodation. To be sure, the Jesuit accommodation aimed at the eventual conversion of the Chinese, but, Gernet complains, "many missionaries truly held the naive belief that the most ancient Chinese ideas were identical to those of the Bible" (ibid.: 29). In reading the Chinese classics as though they were a kind of Old Testament that could be allegorized to appear compatible with Christian concepts and values, Gernet argues, Ricci and the Jesuit fathers misunderstood and misrepresented a non-Western culture as if it could have anything in common with the Christian West.

The rites controversy was basically the doctrinal purists' reaction against cultural accommodation or Ricci's "error" of making concessions to a pagan tradition. Against Ricci's argument for the compatibility of Chinese culture with Christian doctrine, the purists emphasized the fundamental difference between the East and the West and reaffirmed the spiritual exclusiveness of the Christian faith. The Chinese classics are not Old Testament, after all, so why bother to interpret them as though they were congenial to Christian values? The Franciscan father Antonio de Caballero, alias Sainte-Marie, makes the point most clearly: "What does it matter whether or not the ancient Chinese knew God?" he asks. "We are here to proclaim the Holy Gospel, not to become apostles of Confucius." The Chinese, including those converted men of letters, have no understanding of spiritual truth. "In the passages where they appear to speak of our God and his Angels," he continues, "they are merely aping the Truth or, if you like, they resemble the peacock whose feet are a disgrace to its splendid rich plumage" (quoted in ibid.: 33). Niccolò Longobardi, Ricci's successor in the China mission, held completely different views about the Chinese

from Ricci's. "Their secret philosophy," Longobardi says of the Chinese, "is pure materialism," for they "have never known any spiritual substance distinct from matter." Father Sabatino de Ursis concurs: "According to the principles of their philosophy, the Chinese have never known any spiritual substance distinct from matter. . . . And consequently they have never known either God or the Angels or the Rational Soul" (quoted in ibid.: 203). This Chinese materialism is soon related to the limitations of the very language with which the Chinese express themselves. If God, angels, and the other spiritual realities can be expressed only in a Western language as a vehicle for Western thinking, then the Chinese language, as expression of Chinese thinking, is concrete and materialist, with no spiritual value whatsoever. The use of Chinese expressions like *shangdi* (Sovereign on High) to mean "God" and the word *tian* as "heaven" were officially condemned by Pope Clement XI in 1704 and 1715. The problem persists, however. "Is there any convenient method of stating the doctrine of the Trinity which does not imply the grossest materialism?" asks C. W. Mateer, a Protestant priest, in 1908. "Who has been fortunate enough to discover a name for sin which does not dash us on the Scylla of civil crime or engulph [*sic*] us in the Charybdis of retribution for the faults of a former life?" (quoted in Wright 1953: 291). In the eyes of the Christian spiritualists, Chinese culture is materialist, and the Chinese language is concrete, material, utterly incapable of conveying any spiritual truth, abstract ideas, transcendental notions, or metaphysical concepts.

The translation of terminology, or more generally the problem of language, is always crucial in cross-cultural interrelations. It is here that we find the old view on the Chinese language in the rites controversy, the emphasis on cultural difference and the *untranslatability* of terms, still influential and reemerging from time to time in modern sinological works. In a well-known essay, "The Chinese Language and Foreign Ideas," Arthur Wright basically agrees with the many missionaries he cites, and he comes to the conclusion that "Chinese was relatively poor in resources for expressing abstractions and general classes or qualities. 'Truth' tended to develop into 'something that is true.' 'Man' tended to be understood as 'the people'—general but not abstract. 'Hope' was difficult to abstract from a series of expectations directed toward specific objects" (ibid.: 287). Based on the ideas of Longobardi and the other doctrinal purists, Jacques Gernet maintains that the conflict between Christianity and Chinese culture ultimately comes from a fundamental difference: "not only of different intellectual traditions but also of different mental categories and modes of thought" (1985: 3). Seeing language as the indicator of a certain "mode of thought," Gernet finally traces all the difficulties the Christian mis-

sionaries had in China to the fundamental difference in language, to the problem of expressing abstract ideas in Chinese, the embarrassing failure "to translate into Chinese concepts formed in inflected languages such as Greek, Latin or Sanskrit" (ibid.: 239). Presumably all Chinese translations of foreign works are, for Gernet, little more than an embarrassing corruption of the original Indo-European ideas. "Of all the languages in the world," he writes with unwarranted assurance, "Chinese has the peculiar, distinctive feature of possessing no grammatical categories systematically differentiated by morphology: there appears to be nothing to distinguish a verb from an adjective, an adverb from a complement, a subject from an attribute" (ibid.: 241). From this supposed lack of grammar in the Chinese language, Gernet infers a corresponding lack of the notion of being in Chinese philosophy: "Furthermore, there was no word to denote existence in Chinese, nothing to convey the concept of being or essence, which in Greek is so conveniently expressed by the noun *ousia* or the neuter *to on*. Consequently, the notion of being, in the sense of an eternal and constant reality, above and beyond that which is phenomenal, was perhaps more difficult to conceive, for a Chinese" (ibid.: 241).

In this ex cathedra pronouncement of cultural difference between China and the West, a sharp antithesis is set up by evoking the Greek notion of being, the concept of metaphysical ontology, the transcendental *ousia*. It is no use to protest that the Chinese may also possess general and abstract notions such as *li* (principle, reason), *qi* (universal energy, vitality), *yin* (the feminine principle), *yang* (the masculine principle), *you* (being, having), *wu* (nonbeing, nonhaving), *dao* (Tao, the Way), and so forth. Once it is decided that the Chinese language cannot express abstract notions, it follows that whatever notion there is in Chinese, it cannot be abstract. That is the logic Longobardi articulates, and we still encounter it in some sinological discussions of the nature of the Chinese language and thinking. According to Longobardi, *li* is "nothing other than primary matter" (ibid.: 206), and *qi* is only "the primeval air" (ibid.: 207). Gernet agrees. The Chinese have neither grammar nor logic because, says Gernet, "logic comes from *logos*" (ibid.: 239). The contrast between the Chinese and Western languages proves, he concludes, that "the structure of Indo-European languages seem to have helped the Greek world—and thereafter the Christian one—to conceive the idea of realities that are transcendental and immutable as opposed to realities which are perceived by the senses and which are transitory" (ibid.: 244).

Such a line of argument runs consistently through a number of sinological works that explain the Chinese language, literature, and culture as the opposite of whatever they believe the unique nature of Western lan-

guage, literature, or culture to be. Thus, some have argued that the Chinese see the world as an accumulation of stuff or substances marked by "mass nouns" in their language (see Hansen 1983); that the Chinese hold a "wholly immanent vision" expressed in "a language of concreteness" (Hall and Ames 1987); that Chinese as a language of natural signs or concrete things does not point to anything beyond its bodily sense, its materiality or literality to represent things in an imagined fictional world; that there is no metaphor, allegory, or fictionality in Chinese; and that what is called Chinese literature is really literal records of experiences at a particular time and place, or autobiographical accounts in the world of empirical events and concrete phenomena (see Owen 1985, Yu 1987).[4] In such a view, the Chinese language, thinking, and culture remain firmly grounded in matter or materialism, and ideas first articulated by the doctrinal purists in the Catholic Church two or three centuries ago are transformed into modern scholarly pronouncements. Formulations like these cover a large ground of religion, philosophy, and literary criticism and may differ in motivation, theoretical orientation, and details of argument, but when put together, their similarities become most striking as they show an unmistakable point of convergence: namely, the conceptualization of cultural difference between China and the West in a mutually exclusive opposition that recalls the Christian orthodox view in the seventeenth-century rites controversy.

The significance of the rites controversy for understanding modern debates is just beginning to unfold in recent scholarship. Lionel Jensen's discussion of the "invention of Confucius," as cited earlier, discloses the nature of the Jesuit accommodation as the subtle appropriation of a native Chinese tradition. Haun Saussy's book *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic* challenges the presumption of radical immanence by showing the close relations of current debates in the study of Chinese literature with "the missionary beginnings of European sinology" (1993: 36). Put in the perspective of historical connections, we can see that it is a similar will to differentiation that makes Longobardi and some modern sinologists emphasize the fundamental difference between China and the West and advocate the idea that the Chinese do not have any notion of transcendence or

4. Being in principle opposed to the classification of individual human beings into collective categories and group mentalities, I certainly do not believe that *all* sinologists hold views that present China as the opposite of the West. Scholars like James J. Y. Liu, Andrew Plaks, and Kang-i Sun Chang, to mention just a few, have all used the concept of allegory in their discussion of Chinese literature. Even Stephen Owen and Pauline Yu are aware of some of the nuances. For example, while insisting on the literal reading of *shi* poetry, Owen allows certain subgenres of Chinese poetry to entertain fictionality, and more recently he has questioned the authenticity of the historical ground of Chinese poetry (see Owen 1990).

know any distinction between the spiritual and the material, the abstract and the concrete, the fictional and the literal, and so forth. If Ricci's effort to understand Chinese culture in Christian terms was, for a sixteenth-century Jesuit missionary, the necessary first step in cross-cultural understanding, Longobardi and Bouvet, though nearly opposite in their views concerning the Chinese, actually retreated from such a step. Not only does Longobardi's dismissal of Chinese culture as totally materialist come from the will to differentiation, but so does Bouvet's idealization of Fu Xi and ancient Confucianism as a precursor or shadow of true Christianity, one that can be truly understood only by a Christian interpreter, not a native Chinese scholar. Whether manifested as a negative dismissal or a positive idealization, the will to differentiation is bound to produce an image of China that is nothing but a cultural myth of difference.[5] In some peculiar ways, such an image still emerges from time to time in the modern Western discourse on China. Given the pervasive antithetical structure in formulating the cultural difference between China and the West, the importance of a historical perspective cannot be overemphasized, because it is such a perspective that will allow us to recognize the often unacknowledged and insufficiently theorized connections between missionary debates and scholarly arguments today and will challenge us to reconsider some of the basic assumptions of modern sinological studies.

Degrees of Difference

Now what does the polemic against Jewish literalism have in common with the presumption about Chinese language and culture as totally concrete, materialist, without notions of transcendence, and so forth? There seems to be a difference of emphasis in the two versions of literalism, for in Origen's attack against rabbinic interpretation, the focus was on the reading of Scripture and thus on matters of textual interpretation, while in Longobardi's disparagement of Chinese philosophy and language, the concern was with a materialist outlook and a practical orientation in life, and in some modern scholarly views on the Chinese language and writing, the version of literalism is also related to the alleged immanence of a materialist and monistic Chinese *Weltanschauung*. That is, as a polemical object, Jewish literalism was perceived to be of a textual nature, as the inadequate

5. I have discussed elsewhere the Western construction of China as a cultural myth, both the negative and the positive images; I have also shown the relationship between the missionary debates and the modern argument, from Ezra Pound to certain sinologists, about the "naturalness" of the Chinese language and writing (see Zhang 1988, 1996).

interpretation of the Scriptures, while Chinese "literalism" was more of a matter of life and the world. Text and the world, however, are not mutually exclusive, and it would be a mistake to set up a rigid dichotomy between the two. The reading of the Torah or the Christian Bible has always borne a close relation to the religious and social life of Jews and Christians, while arguments about the Chinese outlook on life and the world are often based on the interpretation of ancient Chinese books, especially the Confucian classics. Moreover, insofar as they are constructed to be "literalistic" in a broad sense, the Jewish and the Chinese traditions have both been perceived as a foil to the spiritual values of Christianity, and they are both seen in that context as totally immanent, without the capacity to go beyond the bodily, the literal, the mundanely historical. At the other extreme of the dichotomy, against the mundane and the immanent, stands the spiritualist notion of transcendence understood in narrowly defined Platonic terms. Thus, pitted against Hebraism or the Chinese "radical immanence" is not just Hellenism, but an etherealized Platonism.

But, one may ask, aren't all these contrasts and oppositions built on badly exaggerated generalizations? Isn't Hellenism more than a spiritualist Platonism? And, indeed, isn't Plato a philosopher who, like any other philosopher, cannot be reduced to an abstract, bodiless specter? One may add that to reduce Platonism to an overweening intellectualism or spiritualism is to ignore much of what Socrates teaches about man and society, the deeply moral concerns of the Socratic philosophy. "Plato's *Republic*, that most influential of ancient works," as Louis Feldman notes in a critique of the old dichotomy between Hellenism and Hebraism, "while identifying virtues with knowledge, proceeds to stress the practical applications of these virtues" (1994: 118). Plato is certainly different from Moses or Confucius, but that difference cannot be taken for an absolute one between intellectual values and practical concerns, or between transcendence and immanence. All these values, concerns, and categories are present, although no doubt in different forms and different degrees, in all these philosophical and cultural traditions. To realize that languages and cultures differ from one another to some degree is one thing, but to exaggerate their differences to the absolute degree and polarize them in an either/or dichotomy is quite another.

Insofar as both the Hellenic and the Hebraic traditions have long been recognized as the fountainheads of Western civilization, the dichotomy between Hellenism and Hebraism cannot, logically and in theory at least, be considered absolute. It seems much easier, on the other hand, to exaggerate the cultural differences between the East and the West and set them up in a rigid and total antithesis. An implicit Eurocentric prejudice

manifests itself in the negative way in which the Chinese language, literature, and culture are defined as the lack of something uniquely Western, typically expressed in such formulaic forms as "there is no word in Chinese for such and such a concept or term." Expressions like these do not just register the presence of cultural differences; they tend to set differences in a hierarchical relation. "If the Chinese imagination is literal and the Western one figurative," as Saussy remarks, "their relation cannot be symmetrical; comparing the two will only reduce one to the other, make it the other's moon. . . . The figurative has a place for the literal (as tenor or vehicle), but the literal cannot account for the figurative except by abandoning the literal position" (1993: 34). In other words, since the literal by definition cannot know the meaning of the figurative and thus cannot tell their difference, it is only the figurative that can fully realize the nature of literalism as its inadequate opposite.

Here again we recognize the familiar strategy of typological appropriation, for the imbalance between Chinese literalism and Western allegorism means that the Chinese will invariably mistake shadows for transcendental reality that they cannot know, and that only the West or Western scholars have the concept, the language, and the analytic tools to understand the nature of China. Isn't this reminiscent of the opposition between the letter and the spirit in Christian allegorical interpretation and the ways in which Origen dismisses what he considers to be the limitations of Jewish literalism?

Yet the letter and the spirit, literalism and allegorism, Hebraism and Hellenism, or Chinese immanence and Western transcendence, as I have tried to show, are all cultural constructs rather than representations of the reality of different traditions. To the extent that differentiation is prerequisite for the establishment of any identity, the desire for difference is inevitable, and the recognition of difference is crucial for the very notion of culture and tradition. But to recognize difference means to acknowledge it *within* cultures as well as between cultures and to see it as a matter of degree, not of kind.

What we recognize as the Chinese cultural tradition is by no means a singular or monolithic body of knowledge or codes of behavior; nor does it provide one unified perspective or one way of thinking. To speak only of the most influential trends of thought in traditional China, there are at least the three major religious and philosophical orientations: the Confucian, the Buddhist, and the Taoist, of which the Buddhist culture originated in India and began integrating into the Chinese tradition at a relatively early time in history. If Confucianism is mostly concerned with moral behavior and political action based on a set of principles of inter-

personal relationships, Taoism and Buddhism often delve into metaphysical questions about man and nature in religious and mystical terms. All these three teachings (*san jiao*) interact with one another and offer certain views about the universe and its basic elements, about nature and human nature, about man and society and the forces above, but they also differ significantly in many ways. In Chinese antiquity, before the unification of the various small states into the first big empire of Qin (221 B.C.E.), many philosophical schools contended with one another in lively debates. The different pre-Qin philosophical schools, as the Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi (369?–286? B.C.E.) observes, "all affirm what others negate, and negate what others affirm" (Guo Qingfan 1986 [1954]: 31). The Confucian thinker Xunzi (300?–237? B.C.E.) also remarks that "all the princes today differ in their ruling policies, and all the hundred schools differ in their philosophies. Therefore some must be right and some wrong, some result in stable condition and some bring about chaos" (Wang Xianqian 1986 [1954]: 258). The great diversity of philosophical ideas and views within the larger context of ancient Chinese culture is often referred to as a hundred flowers in full bloom and a hundred schools contending in argumentation: a picture of rich colors, changing shapes, and very different contrasting and complementary forms. If it makes sense at all to speak of a Chinese cultural identity, one cannot reduce that identity to any one of these different trends of thought or philosophical orientations but must allow all these views to assume a place and contribute to this rich tradition.

Likewise in rabbinic Judaism, diverse opinions and multiple interpretations of every law are all preserved as articulating the will of God. The proclivity toward different interpretations can be said to characterize midrash and rabbinic exegesis in general, and if the interpretation of the law was decided according to the opinion of the famous House of Hillel in its debate with the House of Shammai, both of which were important first-century schools of Pharisaic sages, it was because the House of Hillel respected its opponents and taught the teachings of the House of Shammai before it taught its own (see Stern 1988: 140). That is to say, in both Chinese and Jewish cultures, a great number of different views and ideas about a great number of things exist side by side, and they cannot be reduced to a single "literalistic" or "immanent" outlook to contrast with an equally reductionist view of the Hellenic or Christian tradition. To do so would only produce what Daniel Bonevac calls "a cartoon version of foreign thought, contrasted with a cartoon version of the West" (1994: 158). Only such simplistic cartoon versions of culture would fit in the dichotomous frame dictated by the will to differentiation, the either/or presumption of the contrastive principle, but these cartoon versions cannot help us

understand the richness, the variety, and the complexity of different cultures and their dynamic interactions.

To the extent that differences are necessary for the very conceptualization of culture and identity, they must be fully recognized where they function in the world's different languages, religions, histories, and social and political institutions. All the concepts and names we use to speak of cultures—the Hellenic, the Hebraic, the Western, the Chinese, and so on—depend on the recognition of such differences. In the study of cultures, however, and especially in cross-cultural understanding, the recognition of difference means first of all a careful and patient differentiation of real as opposed to imaginary differences, that is, differences that can be found in the reality of languages, histories, and social and political institutions, as opposed to differences that are constructed or fabricated outside these by applying the contrastive principle, by pushing difference of degree to the absurd extreme, by imagining cultural values as uniquely one's own and the essence of an alien culture as whatever stands at the opposite from one's self. Perhaps owing to the deeply conservative and ethnocentric nature of cultural systems in isolation as well as to the attractiveness of exoticism, all cultures tend to engage in the construction of such myths of cultural difference, but that makes the differentiation of reality from fabrication all the more important. Here, perhaps, the difference in language is not only the most basic and most obvious but also the most paradigmatic, and thus the translation of a foreign language can serve as a model for cross-cultural understanding. One has no difficulty in knowing the foreignness of a foreign language, where the difference is an undeniable reality, but in trying to understand a foreign language, one cannot simply imagine its meaning but must first acknowledge its meaning as determined by a foreign system, then make comparisons with one's own language and find equivalent ways of expression. Linguistic purists, like cultural purists, always emphasize the uniqueness of a language and its untranslatability into any other, but communication is and has always been possible by negotiating a common ground between the foreign and the familiar, a ground on which we find not the identical but the equivalent, which makes the experience of the foreign possible. "The very aim of translation—to open up in writing a certain relation with the Other, to fertilize what is one's Own through the mediation of what is Foreign," as Antoine Berman puts it so astutely, "is diametrically opposed to the ethnocentric structure of every culture, that species of narcissism by which every society wants to be a pure and unadulterated Whole" (1992: 4). What we get in translation is not the original, certainly not the myth of a pure linguistic essence; likewise, in cross-cultural translation of ideas and values, what we get is not the myth of an unadul-

terated cultural essence. What translation allows us to gain, however, is invaluable—that is, understanding, knowledge, and communication, for which every effort of ours is worthwhile and will be richly rewarded.

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